Is Oconee shifting gears?

Meeting today may shed light on vague development plans

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Hope is patience with the lamp lit.
— Tertullian, early Christian author

WALHALLA — If you have been patiently waiting, hoping to find out the particulars of the Oconee County Council's planned property purchases and how they may figure into a development plan, the lamp may be lit this morning.

The agenda for an 8 a.m. meeting and comments by a couple of council members indicate that the public may get some insight into the council's plans for both land acquisition and that land's impact on county-driven economic development.

The agenda for the workshop calls for "discussion and possible action" on the scope and cost of a new jail, a number of sewer issues — I-85, Golden Corner Commerce Park, 208 Authority, "other sewer options" — and property acquisition, among other things.

Councilman Joel Thrift rather cryptically suggested this week that questions about the county's lack of action on I-85 exit and Golden Corner Commerce park development in recent months and how the new property purchases may be related would be answered at this morning's meeting.

One of the three parcels the county appears driven to negotiate for — two readings have been held on an ordinance that would approve purchasing parcels that have not been identified in the document — is 415 acres on SC Highway 11, between Walhalla and Westminster.

The land is owned by England Properties, L.P., whose principal is identified as B.M. England. Thrift acknowledges that "Snook" England, as he is known, has been a friend for many years but denies any conflict of interest.

ated by the Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority (OJRSA). An expert in utilities said sewer and water could likely be extended to the property for $500,000 or less.

That is considerably less than the prospect the county faces for getting sewer and water to its Golden Corner Commerce Park (GCCP) on SC Highway 59 near Fair Play and to exits 1, 2 and 4 on Interstate 85. Those projects appeared to be near the top of the county's economic development priority list less than a year ago, but virtually no mention has been made of those projects in recent months.

That silence and the tardiness of this year's Sewer and Water Action Group (SWAG) payment from the county to OJRSA, combined with the property purchases and "sewer projects" on today's council agenda have raised questions about whether the council is realigning its development priorities.

Council Chairman Reg Dexter was quoted Thursday as saying he hopes today's meeting will lead to some consensus on the part of the council on how to move forward on both jail and sewer development matters.

As recent as last November, Thrift told some three-dozen people attending a Voices of Southern Oconee meeting he was confident council would approve an $11.7 million, three-phase sewer project to make Oconee's four miles of I-85 a hotbed of development.

At that same meeting, Seneca Administrator and OJRSA board member Greg Dietterick, who chaired a council-appointed "blue ribbon panel," outlined details of the recommended three-phase project. The first phase would be a $6.6 million investment in a package sewer treatment plant and drip irrigation system in the GCCP. That price tag would also pay for sewer lines south to Exit 4 on I-85. Phase two carries a $1.4 million price tag and would result in lines being installed down to Exit 2. Phase three, at $3.7 million, would connect exits 2 and 4 and require additional acreage for irrigation.

Dietterick said Thursday he has not heard "one word" about the blue ribbon recommendation in months.

Dietterick said a meeting between OJRSA members and council members to discuss details Corbeil and Dexter had on an Exit 1 development was canceled. He said an OJRSA workshop has been sought for months to discuss future sewer needs and was recently scheduled for Aug. 24.

OJRSA Director Bob Winchester said the council discussion of sewer options this morning apparently does not require input from the authority since neither he nor any board members had been

County being 'too aggressive,' one citizen says

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To this point, County Council has lacked consensus on how the property should be developed if purchased. Mario Suarez has advocated a recreational facility, Wayne McCall has suggested heavy industry would be attracted to the site and Paul Corbeil has mentioned a possible blending of passive recreation and light commercial industry.

"I think it's a great opportunity for us," Corbeil said in July. "It's an attractive site for economic development."

The parcel has been listed with a Greenville broker for over four years. The asking price is $2,995,000 ($7,214 per acre), but the county is believed to be offering an estimated $2.5 million.

One of the attractions of the property is its proximity to an existing 10-inch Walhalla water line and a sewer trunk line operated by the Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority (OJRSA). Both are adequate for industrial use, but neither is adequate for residential development.

Council Chairman Reid Lyle said he was not aware of the meeting and was not notified of the meeting or asked to attend.

Winchester confirmed that he sent the county a SWAG payment invoice on July 1. He said the payments have always been made in about 10 business days, but that he had not received payment as of Thursday.

In July 2009 council delegated sewer permitting responsibilities to the OJRSA with the caveat that council "remains in the loop" on any action taken by the authority so that development opportunities were not missed. The state requires that "208 authority," as it is known, be assigned to an agency.

Asked if the presence of a "208 authority" item on today's agenda — coupled with the lack of a SWAG payment — was a concern, Winchester said, he has heard the council may be changing its priorities.

"I don't know what they are doing. I have no clue," Winchester said.

Apparently, someone who does have a clue is Blue Ridge Electric CEO Charles Dalton.

Blue Ridge spokesman Terry Ballenger said this week that Dalton has talked with county council members about contributing Rural Development Act (RDA) funds to the SC Highway 11 project.

Under state law, utilities can contribute up to $300,000 annually of what would have been tax payments to local "job creation" efforts. Ballenger said his understanding is that the Highway 11 payments would be made over four years, beginning in 2012 or 2013.

Asked if Blue Ridge was prone to contributing RDA funds to undefined projects as Highway 11 appears to be, Ballenger said, "We're looking at a couple of years down the road and I think that, by then, we will have a much clearer picture (of the development). If it doesn't quite fit, we have to abide by the law, and something would have to change."

Blue Ridge has been a contributor to other county initiatives in the past and is being eyed by the county for an $800,000 contribution to the current spec building being built at the county's Commerce Park and $500,000 for the first phase of the GCCP. Ballenger confirmed commitments to both projects, which are in Blue Ridge service areas.

At least one citizen, local commercial broker John Adams, has expressed concern that, if the county is adding the SC Highway 11 property to its development portfolio, it is being "too aggressive."

Citing the Oconee County Commerce Park on Highway 123 and the GCCP, Adams told council, "There is already a two-generation supply without buying 408 more acres ... I am well aware there has been some effort for the county to compete with private developers for project components to justify the county's own efforts. This is totally inappropriate and will, potentially, stall the efforts of private developers from building in Oconee County."

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Propex is second site

- A second parcel of land for which the council has penciled in a $400,000 investment is the former Propex property in Seneca.
- Seneca City Manager Greg Dietterick has confirmed that the city and county are partnering in an effort to purchase the plant, which already has sewer, water, electric, gas and rail on site. Dietterick said the plan has been for the county to buy the acreage and the city to purchase the existing plant.
- The partnership is being driven by the fact that, with county involvement, the site would qualify for fee-in-lieu-of tax incentives that the city would be hard-pressed to acquire otherwise.
- The status of those negotiations is unknown, but they have been ongoing for several months. Dietterick declined to speculate on the outcome of those talks.